

**STATEMENT
OF
SENATOR DANIEL K. INOUE
CHAIRMAN
COMMITTEE ON INDIAN AFFAIRS
BEFORE THE
MAY 10, 2002
OVERSIGHT HEARING
ON THE
IMPLEMENTATION OF THE PERSONAL
RESPONSIBILITY AND WORK OPPORTUNITY
RECONCILIATION ACT OF 1996**

The Committee meets this morning to receive testimony on the implementation of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 in Indian country.

Seven years ago, when this act was being formulated, the Committee on Indian Affairs worked with the Senate Finance Committee to address the unique circumstances of Indian country, where unemployment rates in Tribal communities that range from fifty percent and higher are unfortunately common, and where the goal of transitioning from welfare to work is frustrated by the fact that there simply are not many job opportunities on or near many Indian

reservations.

Studies inform us that across Native America, thousands of Indian adults seized the opportunity of welfare reform initiatives to acquire new skills and take advantage of job training and education, but finding work in remote, rural areas has proven to be an almost insurmountable obstacle.

Add to that, where there are high rates of unemployment and poverty, people usually don't have or can't afford transportation to take them to and from places of work that are often located at great distances from their home communities.

The lack of child care options for single parents trying to enter the workforce further frustrates the ability of those who are committed to leaving a life dependent on welfare behind.

The act provided authority for Tribal Governments to assume responsibilities for the administration of welfare programs formerly administered by the States, but the act did not provide the kinds of resources that had been provided to States through various block grants to develop the necessary infrastructure to administer welfare programs.

From 1980 to 1992, States received approximately \$542 million for automated computer systems to administer welfare programs.

Accordingly, many Tribal Governments simply didn't have the computer systems and administrative structures in place to develop and administer the temporary assistance for needy families program.

There are many complex issues associated with how welfare-to-work clients are counted by the States, and to what extent State numbers draw upon unemployment rates on Indian reservations for purposes of receiving federal funding, but do not commit a proportionate share of resources in the provision of welfare-to-work program services to Indian people.

We will receive testimony today from representatives of the General Accounting Office, who, at the request of the Committees on Indian Affairs and Finance, are completing a study of the implementation of welfare reform in Indian country.

In addition, we will hear from other witnesses today who have studied some aspect of how welfare reform is working in Native America as well as from tribal leaders and program administrators who

will relate their experiences with developing effective Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (T.A.N.F.) programs.

It is most unfortunate that with all of this important and useful information that will be placed in the official records of the Senate today, the federal agency that is charged with the primary responsibility for implementing welfare reform – the Department of Health and Human Services – has declined to appear before the Committee today on the grounds that they are “too busy”.

Sadly, it would seem that the Department doesn’t place a very high priority on welfare reform in Indian country.

A few days ago, Senator Baucus introduced a bill entitled the American Indian Welfare Reform Act, Senate Bill 2484.

This bill seeks to address many of the special circumstances in Indian country and to provide a great array of resources for tribal T.A.N.F. programs.

We look forward to the testimony today, as we work with our colleagues on the Senate Finance Committee to assure that welfare reform initiatives are adapted to be more effective in serving the needs of

Native America.